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Screening TV

Comic Bill Cosby May Take Role in Racial Breakthrough on NBC

By HARRY HARRIS
Of The Inquirer Staff

PHILADELPHIA comedian Bill Cosby may be involved in TV's most significant integration breakthrough.

He's slated to costar with Robert Culp, formerly of "Trackdown," in an hour-long adventure series NBC plans to air in 1965-66.

Still untitled, the show will be produced by Sheldon Leonard, who's teamed with Danny Thomas in such popular projects as "The Dick Van Dyke Show," "The Andy Griffith Show" and "The Bill Dana Show."

Cosby won't be just a "regular," sometimes barely glimpsed, as was the case with Cicely Tyson in last season's "East Side/West Side."

He'll be an integral part of every episode, as one of two CIA undercover agents abroad. Plans call for filming the series in Los Angeles, with frequent "location" treks to places like Hong Kong, site of the proposed pilot, Tokyo, Athens and Rome.

Although Bill presumes he'll be contributing "comic relief," the character he portrays will be a bright, courageous college graduate.



BILL COSBY

SO FAR, no contracts have been signed. Cosby is waiting for an initial script, and he's especially concerned about the writers' delineation of his own role.

According to early reports, Culp is supposed to masquerade in the series as a roving "tennis bum," while Cosby pretends to be his valet, butler or "man Friday."

"That way," Bill opined, "it could be the same old junk, like Rochester on Jack Benny's shows, only I'm a college graduate."

"I may be more a manager-trainer. One thing's sure, it won't be ME playing tennis."

Is there any danger that his assignment will turn out to be a variation on the "servile roles" civil rights groups have been protesting?

"I don't know," Bill said. "That's why I've got to see a script first. But Sheldon Leonard called the NAACP and others and told them what he had in mind."

"Sheldon and his associates are very respectable, responsible men, and everything they've put out has been in good taste. I remember one 'Dick Van Dyke Show' in which Negro actors were used very well."

"I don't know if my doing this part would represent a breakthrough on TV, but it would certainly be a breakthrough for me. If I do well, there may be more interesting acting jobs."

"One thing I like is that the role didn't originally call for a Negro, just someone who could act and be funny and 'mesh'."

"I turned down three movie parts because they were written ONLY for a Negro."

"I see the series as a challenge. I'd like to see it happen, but I'm not excited about it. I'd like to know when I start work. THEN I'll get excited."

DOES he fear that the deal may fall through because of "white backlash" or because Southern affiliates might refuse to accept a Negro hero?

"I don't know if there'll be Southern resistance," he said. "There might be. But I don't think that's the problem as much as what to do with me in the series."

"White backlash, black backlash, any kind of backlash won't have any real effect unless EVERYONE turns off his set."

Television is paying lip service to integration next season, we noted, by casting a number of Orientals—but nary a Negro—as series regulars.

"It's easier to save face with

I had to tell him I don't have anything on that or on the racial situation.

"What I talk about is what happened in my neighborhood when I was growing up, which I imagine is the same problem."

"But I don't lecture. When my foot hits the stage, I'm a comic, period. If I say, 'You know what happened today?' I'm not being fair to the people who have come to me for laughter."

"The whole question about Negro comics is: If you colored Orientals," said Cosby. They're more acceptable. But they have to decide whether they're going to just stop there or go straight ahead."

Although he has emphatic views on the civil rights struggle, Bill excludes strictly-racial quips from his TV and night club comedy routines.

"Sometimes I'm asked to make topical comments, not only racial ones. A news magazine guy called me and asked if I had any Goldwater jokes."

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